

Taking a BITE out of the competition

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A dog's life ain't what it used to be. It's gotten better — especially for the nine military working dogs assigned to the 60th Security Forces Squadron kennel. Kennel master TSgt. Michael Casares, his eight dog handlers and two trainers not only care for the dogs but trust them with their lives.

That's because if one of the dogs at Travis is called out on the job, it's usually for one of two reasons — to sniff out the presence of drugs or explosives.

"Military working dogs train differently than civilian police dogs," Casares said. "Our primary goal is detection. For example: If the president is visiting, a military dog will be brought in to sweep the area, checking for explosives."

Casares goes on to explain that because of the liability issues that civilian law enforcement agencies face, their dog handlers' primary concern is canine obedience, using the dogs primarily for handler protection.

With this in mind, the Travis handlers had no idea what they might be asked to do when they entered their first K-9 competition against civilian law agencies. However, this past June, two of the Travis canines were entered in a Sacramento competition. The Sacramento County Sheriff's Department, hosts for the event, invited approximately 36 working-dog organizations to the week-end competition.

Being the only military unit invited to compete, and the fact that civilian and military organizations train with different goals in mind, left the Travis dog handlers wondering what to expect in their first outing.

SrA Ernie Owens with his dog Arko, and SrA Armando Salazar with his dog Dino, made a fine showing in their first competition.

"We didn't know exactly what we would be asked to do," Owens said. "But, we know what our dogs can do, and that's all that matters."

And what their dogs can do is pretty impressive. Given seven minutes to clear a room of all possible explosives — with points deducted for false sets (the attitude a dog takes to indicate detection), and 25 points awarded for each correct response — the team placed second and third.

Salazar, who handles second-place-finisher Dino, has been with the 4-year-old German shepherd since November 2000. Arko is a younger shepherd, only 2 years old, but Owens says he shows great promise. They've been together since February. The handlers had only two months of preparation time, in between their busy work schedule, to get the dogs into competition shape.

The second day of the event brought stiffer competition from the civilian sector when the handlers were asked to demonstrate their dog's skills in the areas of handler protection, search and detection, agility, off-leash obedience and obstacle course maneuvering.

Owens, who also handled dogs while stationed at Ramstein AB, Germany, thinks that Travis' participation in games such as these is a good idea.

"It gives us a chance to see how civilians train their animals," he said. "We can share ideas and techniques." Casares is already thinking about the future. "We'll be better prepared for the next one," he says.

The next one is just around the corner. The Travis team plans to enter Dino and Arko, along with one other dog, in the California Highway Patrol 2001 K-9 Challenge, to take place Aug. 3 and 4 at the CHP Academy, 3500 Reed Ave. in West Sacramento.

"It would be great if a lot of people from the base showed up to support us," Salazar said. "The more they support us, the more competitions we might get to enter."

The competitions are important in many ways according to Casares. In his own words: "These competitions help us to interact with outside [law enforcement] agencies, picking up and sharing training tips, but just as importantly it keeps up the motivation of the handlers and trainers."

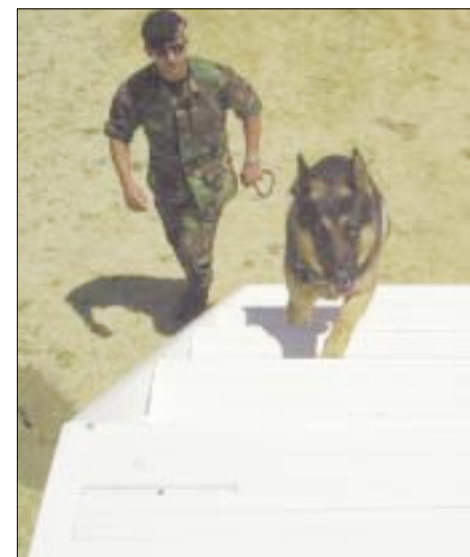
Salazar agrees, saying, "Everyone in the kennel wants to get 'Top Dog' [for the unit]."

For Owens it's about more than just being recognized in the squadron. As a member of the Western State Police Canine Association, Owens is able to rack up points toward becoming Top Dog of the year for the SPCA, though he admits that goal may take him a couple of years to achieve.

SSgt. Earl Wormley, a senior dog trainer, explains yet another goal the unit has in mind.

"We want to host our own competition," he said, noting that Travis has a better training facility than most of its civilian counterparts. He went on to say, "We want to return the favor and invite the agencies that have invited us. We already invite outside organizations to joint train with us; we want to take it a step up and host a competition."

"We should do very well in the next competition," Casares said. "Its focus is on narcotics detection. We can work the dogs faster and don't have to be as careful — drugs don't blow up like explosives do, you know."



(Far left, top), Arko, a 2-year-old German shepherd, under the control of handler SrA Ernie Owens, attacks a heavily-padded trainer, SSgt. Earl Wormley, as the "suspect" flees arresting officers. "Even though this is a thick suit, their teeth sometimes get through," Wormley said. (Far left, bottom), Dino, the 4-year-old shepherd handled by SrA Armando Salazar, goes for the weapon arm of this would-be attacker (played by Wormley). Exercises like these help teach the dogs handler protection skills. (Above), Dino traverses one of the most treacherous of all obstacles for a dog to cross: a swinging bridge. The unsteady footing tends to spook most dogs, but not these K-9 professionals. (Left), Arko demonstrates his ability to surmount an obstacle such as a pyramid of oil drums. (Lower left), Salazar releases Dino at the foot of a steep flight of stairs. Obstacles like these help Travis' military working dogs learn to go boldly wherever the danger may be.